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Fear - and Intimidation

The game depends on fear.

That's right, fear is baseball's essence.

How many times have I heard men my age, or younger, describe the end of their baseball careers: "I couldn't hit. I was afraid of the ball."

Well, *of course* you were afraid of the ball. You're supposed to be. That's the whole idea. The mastery of that fear is what allows you to succeed.

If you've ever been hit with a baseball, and many of us have, . . . it hurts! It's a hard, rock-like object, which leaves a red welt, and then a black and blue bruise for weeks. When this rock is hurtling toward you, your brain sends out an urgent message: "Duck!" "Get out of the way!" "Watch out!" "Close your eyes!"

When the ball hits its mark (or actually misses its mark - the strike zone), and finds your back, or ribs, or butt, tears well up and a piercing pain forces short, uneven breaths. You try to ignore the pain: your teammates instruct, "Don't rub it," don't give the pitcher that satisfaction. You take your base, but in truth it hurts so much that all you want to do is curl up in the arms of a nice woman, your mother perhaps.

Such is the dirty little secret of sports' most profound confrontation - the epic battle between the pitcher and hitter in baseball. It's based on fear - and intimidation.

It's the source of the righty-lefty strategy that dominates baseball at the highest level; it's why a lefty pitcher comes in near the end of a close game to get a tough lefty hitter out - and likewise on the starboard side. The breaking ball, the curveball or slider, creates a momentary illusion of danger to the like-sided batter. The pitch appears headed for his face, then breaks over the plate, as his knees buckle.

The Arizona Diamondbacks' Randy Johnson is today's master of intimidation. This 6'10" lefty has a fastball that goes 95-98 MPH, and his slider is clocked at 90-91 - and breaks three feet! Opposing teams rarely even send a left-handed batter to the plate, such is their lack of success against this towering figure.

Now, the way a left-handed pitcher intimidates a right-handed batter (and vice versa - righty pitcher/lefty batter) is much more direct: a high fastball, inside. In this case, the brain is right - the ball *is* coming toward your head; it is *not* going curve at the last instant. Hit the dirt!

Johnson's predecessors were intimidating right-handers Bob Gibson and Don Drysdale, two fierce competitors, against whom no batter ever dared "dig in." They asserted their right to "pitch inside," to force hitters "off the plate."

In the 1950s, Sal Maglie earned his colorful nickname, "the Barber," by his willingness to give batters a "close shave," and Hall of Famer Early Wynn once said that he would knock his mother down "if she dug in on me." These days, Roger Clemens and Pedro Martinez also throw "chin music" and receive few bouquets from hitters.

There's a nice moment in the movie *Field of Dreams* when the young Archie Graham avoids a terrifying pitch near his head. His mentor, Shoeless Joe Jackson, intones, "Those first two were high and tight, so where do you think the next one's going to be?"

"Well, either low and away . . . or in my ear."

"He's not going to want to load the bases," Shoeless Joe says, "so look for the low and away." He pauses and then adds ominously, "but watch out for 'in your ear.'"

Hitters, not unreasonably, take issue with these tactics of intimidation and respond in kind, with their own violence. These days, a beanball, or even a brushback pitch, will elicit a charge of the mound by a batter and an attack on the pitcher. Some baseball games in the Majors this year have looked more like hockey matches.

Ty Cobb, the meanest man ever to wield a bat, had his own methods of intimidation. He was able to best the greatest pitcher of his day, Walter Johnson, baseball's "Big Train," by exploiting Johnson's fear of maiming a batter with a pitch.

"After he told me he was afraid he might kill a hitter," Cobb said, "I used to cheat. I'd crowd the plate 'til I was actually sticking my toes on it, knowing he'd be so timid he'd pitch me wide."

Baseball coaches encourage their young charges to overcome their natural fear of the ball by saying, "it hurts, but it won't kill you." And they're right, mostly. The only major league player ever to be killed by a pitched ball was 29 year-old Ray Chapman, a Cleveland infielder, in 1920.

Chapman, the Indians' most popular player, was killed by a pitch by the Yankees Carl Mays, a notorious headhunter. He froze, apparently not seeing the Mays' fastball which struck him flush in the temple (protective batting helmets were not required until 1962). The whole story is told in a well-written and beautifully researched book, *The Pitch that Killed*, by Mike Sowell.

Baseball is often viewed with sentimental excess. At its core, however, there is little sentimentality: it is an exercise in suppressed terror.

So . . . afraid of the ball? You bet. It's a grand tradition.